

Woes and Pains of Tea Workers in Closed Tea Gardens

Bundapani Tea Estate is in the news since it was reported in the media that some people have succumbed to starvation following the closure and abandonment by the management. The tea plantation/garden further came to limelight when an article appeared in the BBC magazine which was circulated to much wider readers. Since the Jesuit team of four involved in the social action work was engaged in three other closed plantations under Red Bank Group of Tea, the first news of closure was somewhat ignored knowing well that media coverage had compelled government and non-governmental agencies to step in to bring some relief to the people. However, hearing the works of the Jesuits, some community leaders of Bundapani Tea Estate came to invite us and requested us to “do something for us”. That was what spurred us Jesuits on to make our first visit of the place and assess the situation.



To give an idea of the location of the plantation, Bundapani T.E. is situated about 11 km north-east from the MH 31 West Bengal-Assam National High Way and about a 100 km east of Siliguri (largest urban centre in North Bengal) but barely 2 km south from the Bhutan border. After being closed down in September, 2012 the estate is in shambles as the unpruned tea bushes grown unusually high up to 20 ft. It was the year “when tea garden workers in other gardens started getting Rs. 95 day as daily wages but we were given one month’s wage only after 3 months”, said Lorentus Xalxo of Jangal Line. The garden didn’t close down all of a sudden but after a series unsuccessful negotiations failed to resolved the payment dues of several weeks in the preceding months.

On the question, “is there any kind of work for you now?” Dominic Lakra, one of the community leaders said, “the tea plantation works in Bundapani has completely stopped. Some people get themselves hired in nearby Jay Birpara Tea Estate, some others go to Bhutan for casual works in road or housing construction sites while many have gone out to far off places such as, Delhi and Mumbai including to work in tea plantations of Himachal Pradesh”. While there are sporadic

cases of young girls being taken to cities, the women of Jangal Line told this reporter categorically that except for one 50 yrs old lady, they have not allowed any young woman to venture out. One woman Panchayat member of Bundapani-Dhekelpara Gram Panchayat in fact said, “Women’s groups over here are keeping a close watch on the agents from other tea gardens who tend to visit closed gardens and give false promises to young girls. So, no girl has been taken to other places from this Jangal Line”. But there are cases of some girls being taken to Delhi for work from other hamlets which we could not visit. Interestingly, about 9 adult men were taken to Delhi to work as coolies but on reaching there, they were dispersed to some remote areas and since then their worried family members haven’t heard about them.

Another casualty of the indefinite tea garden closure has been students. While many students, studying at a Catholic Church run Fatima High School for boys and Maria Goretti High School for girls at Dimdima have not been affected as these schools are government-aided and so don’t charged monthly tuition fees, yet due to closure, there is no garden transportation (truck, tractor trailer) and hence, smaller children have been forced to drop out instead of travelling about 24 km back and forth on foot. Furthermore, River Dimdima which connects the Bundapani tea garden from the main road gets cut off during rainy season. So come monsoon rain, people’s hardship will increase doubly as there will not any conveyance to take them either to school or market places.

On being asked “What is the most urgent need of the people?” women almost shouted in unison, “We want job, any kind of work to get our kitchen going”. People are not happy with the response of the government agencies that dump some material in the name of assistance and do not come back to check if things are working well or not.

The best part of our visit and meeting, though, was the resolution passed to begin co-operative management by the labour class. We assured them of our full hearted support, including technical assistance by hiring some retired tea plantation managers to guide the cooperatives.

Fr (Dr) Lalit P. Tirkey SJ

Director, HLDRC

Dear Sir/madam,

First of all my apology for delay in responding to your email. I was away on a seminar followed by 8-day annual retreat, keeping my internet and phones away from myself. On return I was fwd your email concerning the above subject.

first of all I would like to briefly share about our organization Human Life Development & Research Centre (HLDRC) located in Siliguri, the largest urban centre in Northern part of West Bengal. Although housed in an old premise it is a very young organization, having started only in July 2013 with the main focus of empowering the tea plantation workers (esp tribals) in the two districts of Darjeeling & Jalpaiguri.

The HLDRC aims at empowering this community through capacity building

a) preparing grassroots/community level leaders b) provide paralegal training to select people, c) help tea workers obtain their PF/pension after retirement, d) help illiterate people obtain various documents (ration card, bank a/c, etc) to be eligible for diff govt schemes, e) help online filling of SC/ST forms, f) help women SHGs in income generation through livestock rearing/weaving/tailoring etc. (see attachment also).

However we too have some clarification to make besides sharing some information on our constraints

1. Is there any particular reason for selecting this region for Field Study?
2. Do you expect the students to be mainly learning by seeing/doing our is also involves survey (with questionnaire)?
3. We work in both operational as well as closed gardens the latter being about 120 km far from the centre will give better experience of the life situation of tea workers but will be challenging due to logistic problems
4. How will the expenses of the students taken care of?

Some constraints of the organization

1. The building at Siliguri being very old, we will be shifting temporarily (for a year or so) to another location about 5 km from here next to our resident
2. Due to that reason, we will depend on others for accommodation of our guests
3. The organization being very young (2 yrs), and social action in nature our works are still evolving and so it will be easier for us if the type of work to be focused could be explained well.

Kindly clarify the above points but feel free to ask for any clarification from your end. also plz visit our simple website: www.hldrclsg.org

with kind regards,

Fr. (Dr. Lalit P. Tirkey SJ

Director

HLDRC, Siliguri